DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 367 CS 214 371

AUTHOR Henning, Teresa
TITLE Problematizing the Personal: A Feminist Reassessment of Expressionist Rhetoric.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Influences; Discourse Modes; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Language Role; Rhetoric; Self Concept; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Processes; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Feminist Pedagogy; *Personal Writing

ABSTRACT

Peter Elbow's expressionist approach to rhetoric lacks the critical position that feminism requires. Expressionist rhetoric's focus on the personal does not make it a feminist rhetoric because its conception of the personal as well as its conception of itself as a rhetoric is uncritical and ignores the social context that subject positions, discourses, and rhetorics arise from. Expressionists like Elbow, Joan Bolker, and E. B. White view the writer as an individual pitted against the needs or expectations of his or her audience. For James Berlin, their rhetoric posits "an uncritical acceptance of the unified, coherent and originary self." Working from a different set of assumptions on the subject, Sally McConnell-Ginet points out that women writers may be "silent" because they cannot identify with the presence created for them by sexist language. Education includes showing students that the subject positions they hold are socially constituted and that the discourses they write are shaped by discourse conventions. This anti-foundational notion of subject and discourse allows students and teachers alike to see all knowledge as constructed. If professors expect their students to be able to negotiate these discourses and change them, they also need to offer them a critical and social perspective of discourse. Offering them a revised expressionist rhetoric--one that is postmodern and feminist--is one way to empower them to work with, in, and through academic discourse convention. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 371 367

Problematizing the Personal: A Feminist Reassessment of Expressionist Rhetoric

Paper Presented at 1994 CCCC in Nashville, TN

Teresa Henning
Dept. of English
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907

CS214371

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

T. Henning

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Teresa Henning
Purdue University
18 March 1994

Problematizing the Personal:
A Feminist Reassessment of Expressionist Rhetoric

Peter Elbow writes: "This is a good historical moment to be making our case for personal expressive writing in the academy" (10). Elbow argues that work in deconstruction, feminism, and narratology is creating a space for the personal in the academy. All of these groups, according to Elbow, attack the notion that discourse "must follow linear or hierarchical or deductive models of structure, must persuade by trying to overpower, must be 'masterful'" (11). He suggests that the personal essay subverts hierarchical academic discourse.

Although feminists are concerned with subverting hierarchical discourse, they are more concerned with criticizing androcentric discourse conventions that make use of it. To make this critique, feminists such as McConnell-Ginet see "language as a socially situated action...[which] is clearly embedded in the same sociocultural matrix that supports sexual bias in the work we do" (36). Feminists have a dual project; one that argues for language and gender as socially constituted, and the personal empowerment of marginalized groups. Elbow's expressive writing seems to offer a space from which women can speak themselves. However, the expressionist approach lacks the critical position that feminism requires. Expressionist rhetoric does not

acknowledge its own socially constructed position nor the socially constituted position of the subject, so this rhetoric does not meet feminist's aims.

However, I do not want to entirely throw out personal writing. Traditionally, the personal letter and diary forms have sometimes been the only way for women to express themselves. In the classroom, students unfamiliar with academic discourse often find expressive writing very liberating. However, even though expressive writing makes use of first person experiences, this does not mean it cannot or should not account for socially constituted notions of language and the subject. Expressionist rhetoric can be revised by social epistemic and postmodern theory so that it is more feminist.

A social epistemic frame can make expressionist rhetoric more self-reflexive by historically situating its conventions. Its conventions can be traced back to Hugh Blair's and Joseph Campbell's widely popular rhetorics of the late 18th- and early 19th-centuries. Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres rhetorics were grounded in Scottish Common Sense Realism which viewed nature as an orderly mechanism whose laws could be arrived at through induction (Berlin Writing 19-20). The mind utilizes the power of induction through a set of faculties that "correspond perfectly to the experience provided by the material and spiritual world" (Berlin Writing 20). As Vincent Bevilacqua points out "The common sense philosophers thus see the mind not as a tabula rasa void of everything but potential, but as an amalgam of powers...which afford immediate perception of self-evident truths" (qtd. in Berlin Writing 20).

This sense of realism leads Blair to create a belletristic rhetoric that focuses mostly on a poetic style that will leave an impression upon the reader's understanding, fancy, passion, and will. Blair argues that such a style is most effective when it adheres to the qualities of Perspicuity and Ornament. He writes: "For all that can possibly be required of language, is, to convey our ideas clearly to others, and, at the same time, in such a dress, as by pleasing and interesting them, shall most effectively strengthen the impressions which we seek to make" (qtd. in Berlin Writing 28).

Like Blair, Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric places invention outside the scope of rhetoric by viewing language as a dress for thought and rhetoric as the art of selecting an appropriate style. However, unlike Blair, Campbell did not develop his notion of style from the features of literary taste, but rather from the four faculties of the mind. A good style, according to Campbell, should be perspicuitous so it can be understood, vivacious and elegant so it appeals to the imagination, animated so it moves the passions, and musical so that it moves the will (Berlin Writing 24). This emphasis on style was later adopted by current-traditional, formalist, and expressionist rhetorics of the 20th-century.

In current-traditional and formalist rhetorics, the faculty psychology frame and emphasis on audience is lost (Porter 35), but these rhetorics still assume that the writer has access to knowledge the reader does not have (Porter 36). The aim of writing instruction is to help the writer convey this knowledge by adhering to the stylistic practices of unity, coherence, and

grammatical correctness (Porter 36-37). According to James Porter, expressionist rhetorics were a reaction to the "excessive restrictions" of current-traditional and formalist rhetoric (37). Expressionist rhetoric attempted to break free of these restrictions by centering pedagogical activities around helping students develop a style that reflected their own voices (Porter 37).

This final aspect of expressivism seems congenial to feminist projects since feminists have focused on how women and novice writers feel "voiceless" in the face of academic discourse. Joan Bolker describes this phenomena through a case study of two bright women writers. She remarks: "Each of these women describes a lack of personality in her papers, and her sense of non-ownership, and a disappointment at not being able to make herself heard" (906). These women feel voiceless, according to Bolker, because they are overly concerned with pleasing their academic audience. Expressionists such as White and Elbow also view the audience as a threat to the writer's integrity. White writes in the Elements of Style: "the whole duty of the writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer plays to an audience of one. Let him start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and he is as good as dead, although he may make a nice living" (qtd. in Porter 37).

This expressionist view of the relationship between the writer and the audience creates a binary between the individual and the social with the individual being privileged. As a consequence, this rhetoric posits "an uncritical acceptance of the unified, coherent and originary self" (Berlin "Composition"

6). According to Berlin, an expressionist rhetoric does not acknowledge the possibility that the voice the writer comes to is socially constituted. He writes: "the student who knows in his heart that a certain text...is true and authentic is often making a judgment based on a class-defined notion, not a personal and private criterion, the student having invoked a socially inscribed conception of the self in making the judgment" (Berlin "Composition" 6).

The expressionist uncritical view of the subject and the dismissal of the social is problematic because it ignores the other causes for voicelessness that feminists and composition theorists cite. McConnell-Ginet points out that women writers may not be able to identify with the presence created for them by a sexist language. She maintains that a sexist semantics "manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as 'the semantic derogation of women' in the vocabulary and the so-called generic masculines that contribute to women's relative 'psychological invisibility'" (35). Since investing male terms with universality also invest them with presence, female terms become particularized or "invisible" and only gain presence in reference to the universal male term.

This problem of presence can create silent women. Belenky et al.'s Women's Ways of Knowing notes that silent women often have very little formal schooling and come from working class families (33). These women distrust language because words are a way to "separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them" (24). While these women are not literally silent, their attitudes about language suggest a figurative silence. Some

touching verbalizations of this attitude in silent women are:

> --I had to get drunk so I could tell people off.
>
> --The baby listens to him. Men have deep voices. But me, I can't do anything with him. (25)

Although these women can move out of this position of silence, these verbalizations illustrate how acutely silent women feel their lack of presence. Belenky et al. illustrate that only education can give these women a voice.

Education includes showing our students that the subject positions they hold are socially constituted and that the discourses they write are shaped by the discourse conventions of academic discourse. This anti-foundational notion of the subject and discourse allows us to see all knowledge as constructed (664). However, according to Bizzell, this position is dangerous if we cannot move beyond deconstructing "truth claims" and "acknowledge that if no unimpeachable authority and transcendent truth exist, this does not mean no respectable authority and no usable truth exist" (665). Berlin also argues that individual agency is possible in this frame because each individual "represents a unique combination of discourses, of voices, by the virtue of her unique position in the network of discourses encountered," and she is "capable of acting in and through these discourses, working to change them and the material conditions they mediate in her experience" (Berlin "Composition" 9).

Both Bizzell and Berlin can socially constitute the individual and language while also allowing for agency and authority because they adopt a postmodern view of the individual

and community as fragmentary and incoherent. Carolyn Miller argues: "If neither the community nor the individual can be, as portrayed, monolithic, internally coherent, fully available, then neither can be an entity of control and domination...difference and challenge are always possible" (9). By taking on a postmodern view of the subject and the community, the expressionist binary can be overcome without leaving the subject powerless. This postmodern view is important because for feminists to attack oppressive gender roles, they must first make the argument that these roles are constructed, or if you will, they need to argue that the personal is political. For expressionist rhetoric to meet feminist aims, then, it must be revised so that it offers a more sophisticated view of the social and political nature of the subject as well as a more social view of discourse.

A feminist expressionist rhetoric would problematize the subject as a social construction by focusing on the ways that expressive writing is an act of selective self-representation. To illustrate this point, Ruth Ray asks her students to do a series of free writing exercises in which the students write down ten qualities they believe themselves to possess. From that list they choose one feature they really possess, such as honesty, and free write for ten minutes explaining how they are honest, for instance. Later, the students also create a ten item list of features they do not possess and free write on one of those items. These activities illustrate to the students that they possess many qualities, but in writing they can select which of these they want to represent to themselves and others. These

exercises can also be used to start a discussion about how personality qualities are socially constituted.

A feminist expressionist rhetoric also needs to foster a critical view of how personal experience and its representations relate to different aims of writing. In her study of male and female college seniors, Mary Cayton notes that women often describe their writing blocks in affective terms and "exhibited a concern about mediating between themselves and the demands of the audience" (324). Those women who were best able to unblock themselves were those that were either "self-consciously critical" of discourse conventions, or were able to detach themselves from such discourse. By talking about the different aims the personal can have in discourse, we can help our students better understand the writing situation and how they can mediate between themselves and its demands. For instance, when I teach expressive writing to freshman composition students, the goal or aim of such writing is for the student to come to some knowledge about how he or she has been formed by a place, experience, person, etc. The goal of the paper is for the writer to share how that "formative" experience has not only shaped him or her, but also how it has made him or her feel. The audience for these writings is either someone close to the student or the student him or herself. The emphasis of this experience, however, is to encourage an inquiry into how each "self" has been shaped and formed and is still being shaped and formed by social forces.

These students' use of the personal is different from the use of the personal made in academic discourse in this paper, and our field. If you look at the Journals in our field, you will

find that many authors make use of their personal experience in the classroom, for instance. However, this use of the personal is often used to further an argument or encourage exploration in the field of rhetoric and composition. For expressionist rhetoric to raise the personal to the level of the political, it must also be critical about how the personal is used in different discourses.

In addition to informal discussions about the aim of the personal, we can also offer our students formal strategies of analysis that encourage such critical consciousness. James Porter's forum analysis is one such technique that reveals the subject and knowledge positions different types of discourse can create. This series of questions can be applied to any text, but by using such a formal strategy in conjunction with expressionist rhetoric, students can come to understand the ways in which even personal discourse constructs us and we it.

This paper has tried to illustrate that expressionist rhetoric's focus on the personal does not make it a feminist rhetoric because its conception of the personal as well as its conception of itself as a rhetoric is uncritical and ignores the social context that subject positions, discourses, and rhetorics arise from. This uncritical and a-social stance is problematic for feminist projects because feminists rely on a social view of language as a way of critiquing and changing androcentric practices. This feminist perspective is important because it also allows us to understand that meaning making practices are constructed and occur from repeated behavior by individuals

working as a group. If we expect our students to be able to negotiate these discourses and change them, we also need to offer them a critical and social perspective of discourse. This means that we need to educate them in the ways that agency is possible even in an antifoundationalist frame. Offering them a revised expressionist rhetoric -- one that is postmodern and feminist -- is one way we can empower them to work with, in, and through academic discourse conventions.

Works Cited

Belenky, Mary Field, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing. United States: HarperCollins, 1986.

Berlin, James A. "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies: Collapsing the Boundaries." Into the Field: The Site of Composition Studies. Ed. Anne Ruggles Gere. New York: MLA, 1993. In Press.

---. Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984.

Bizzell, Patricia. "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority: Problems Defining 'Cultural Literacy.'" College English 52 (1990): 661-675.

Bolker, Joan. "Teaching Griselda to Write." College English 40 (1979): 906-921.

Cayton, Mary Kupiec. "What Happens When Things Go Wrong: Women and Writing Blocks." Journal of Advanced Composition 10.2 (1990): 321-337.

Elbow, Peter. "Forward: About Personal Expressive Academic Writing." PRE/TEXT 11 (1990): 7-20.

McConnell-Ginet, Sally. "The Sexual (Re)production of Meaning: A Discourse-Based Theory." Language, Gender, and Professional Writing: Theoretical Approaches and Guidelines for Non-Sexist Usage. Eds. Francine Wattman Frank and Paula Treicher. New York: MLA, 1989. 35-50.

Miller, Carolyn R. "Rhetoric and Community: Revisiting the Problem of the One and the Many." Toward Defining the

New Rhetorics. Eds. Theresa Enos and Stuart Brown. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, In Press.

Porter, James E. Audience and Rhetoric: An Archaeological Composition of the Discourse Community. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Ray, Ruth. "Teacher Research as Feminist Study." Multidisciplinary Studies in Composition. Purdue University. West Lafayette, IN, 15 February 1994.